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‘Different Trains’: Denise Levertov, Adolf Eichmann and Moral Blindness

Denise Levertov was, from the publication of her second book, *Here and Now*, in 1957, the most highly regarded female poet of her generation to be identified with that American poetic tradition whose exponents variously saw themselves as following in the path of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound: writers such as Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, each of whom was associated with Black Mountain College and with Donald Allen’s seminal anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960). She corresponded with H. D.¹ and was admired by Marianne Moore,² while the poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth called her ‘incomparably the best poet of what is getting to be known as the new avant garde’.³ Levertov’s prominence was all the more surprising given that she was, as she wrote, ‘Essex-born’,⁴ and moved to the US in 1948, aged twenty-five.⁵ But as she adjusted her ear to American vernacular, she also found her voice—one that was ‘wilfull, tender, evasive,/sad &

¹ Denise Levertov, ‘H. D.: An Appreciation’ (1962), *The Poet in the World* (New York 1973), pp. 244–8.

² Marianne Moore, ‘The Ways Our Poets Have Taken in Fifteen Years Since the War: Review of *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960*’ (1960), *The Complete Prose*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (New York 1986), pp. 535–9 (p. 536).

³ Kenneth Rexroth, ‘The Poetry of Denise Levertov’ (1961), *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Ann Arbor 1993), pp. 11–4 (p. 11).

⁴ Denise Levertov, ‘A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England’, *Poems 1960–1967* [*P*] (New York 1983), pp. 21–2 (p. 21).

⁵ Donna Krolik Hollenberg, *A Poet’s Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov* (Berkeley 2013), p. 115.

rakish'.⁶ Her work was also distinguished by its free or non-metrical lyricism (learned above all from Williams), fluent image-making, and marked visual orientation; and then, as the 1960's went on, for the way she sought to incorporate into her poetry, rather like her American contemporary Adrienne Rich, her developing political activism.

The visual orientation of Levertov's poems, the idea that seeing is believing (to quote Charles Tomlinson, another English admirer of Williams, of the same generation as Levertov), leads to a celebration of presence, of immanence.⁷ We see into the life of things by first looking at that life. We 'come into animal presence',⁸ where 'everything that acts is actual'.⁹ To observe the grandeur of earth and sky is to be present at the 'enactment of rites'.¹⁰ We don't just see, we synaesthetically 'taste and see'.¹¹

life is in me, a love for
what happens, for
the surfaces that are their own
interior life¹²

As with Rilke, whom Levertov greatly admired, the visible surface of things is never superficial; it is replete with their 'interior life', which is an extension of the 'life

⁶ Denise Levertov, 'The Rights', *Collected Poems* [CP], ed. Paul A. Lacey and Anne Dewey (New York 2013), pp. 45-6 (p. 46).

⁷ Charles Tomlinson, *Seeing Is Believing* (New York 1958).

⁸ 'Come into Animal Presence', *P*, p. 23.

⁹ Denise Levertov, 'Everything that Acts Is Actual', *CP*, pp. 54-5.

¹⁰ 'The Room', *CP*, pp. 102-3 (p. 103).

¹¹ 'O Taste and See', *P*, p. 125.

¹² *Staying Alive*, *CP*, pp. 345-96 (p. 382).

[that] is in me’—or, as her older American contemporary and sometime friend George Oppen, another admirer of Rilke, would put it, the physical is always already metaphysical.¹³

As Levertov’s concerns became more political, however, the problem that her poetry struggled with was how to make political sense of a world that the poet was still essentially *looking at*. The events that result from political decisions, such as the Vietnam War, seemed to drain the world of its aura of rich immanence, while the power structures that shape that world and the ideological apparatus that inform our seeing are themselves invisible. Politics will not be televised—only the horror that it leaves behind.

In the poem ‘Biafra’, for example, from 1970, ‘photos of napalmed children’ no longer stir the viewers’ compassion: ‘Now we look sluggishly/at photos of children dying in Biafra’—for ‘The poisoning/called “getting used to”/has taken place’.¹⁴ Faltering transitions and gaps within the lines seem to imitate the jaded reader’s restless eye. We don’t see deeper or wider than the newspaper:

And the news from Biafra (doesn’t make the headlines,
not in today’s paper at all)
doesn’t even get in past our eyes. (ibid.)

In another poem, ‘Advent 1966’, Levertov laments how, confronted by endless images of atrocity,

my strong sight,
my clear caressive sight, my poet’s sight I was given

¹³ ‘The shock’, of the physical, is, for Oppen ‘metaphysical’. George Oppen, ‘The Return’, *New Collected Poems* ed. Michael Davidson (New York 2002), pp. 47-9 (p. 49).

¹⁴ Levertov, ‘Biafra’, *CP*, pp. 282-3.

that it might stir me to song,
is blurred¹⁵

This poem was among those cited by Charles Altieri in what is still arguably the best critical discussion of the poetics of Levertov's political dilemma.¹⁶ One thing that we may perhaps notice in the passage immediately above is the way the poet attempts to counterbalance the blurring of her sight *with* the insistence of her voice (the words 'sight' occurs three times in the space of eight words): but the traditional rhetorical instrument of repetition produces on this occasion only a flat effect of emphasis, which is not made more penetrating by the blunt alliteration ('Clear caressive'; 'stir . . . song') or assonance ('my'/'sight'—this last effect just possibly enlivened by echoes of the I/eye homonym).

The responsibility of testifying to the significance of 'life' began to shift, as Levertov's work became more consciously political, from the act of seeing to the act of giving voice: from what is witnessed to the witness. The poet herself was aware of this: 'I found eyesight wasn't so utterly/my way of being/as I'd supposed', she writes: 'voice' and 'deep listening' now vie with it.¹⁷ There is another telling example of this shift in 'The Day the Audience Walked Out on Me and Why' (1970), where the speaker describes a poetry reading in a church, during which she proceeds to 'rap', as she says, on the poet's exemplary responsibility (exemplary because it represents our mutual responsibility) to remember and bear witness to political

¹⁵ 'Advent 1966', *CP*, pp. 342-3 (p. 343).

¹⁶ Charles Altieri, 'Denise Levertov and the Limits of the Aesthetics of Presence', *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (London 1979), pp. 225-44.

¹⁷ Levertov, 'At the "Mass Ave Poetry Hawkers' Reading in the Red Book Cellar' (1972), *CP*, p. 444.

atrocities (the shooting of white students at Kent State University, of black students at Orangeburg), atrocities that are not themselves described in the poem and that, we may infer, were not directly seen by the poet or her 'audience'.¹⁸ The poem bears witness to the poet as witness, the authority of her voice—rather than trying to get the reader to see what was unseen. The danger, here, for Levertov, as for any poet, is of taking her authority for granted—as if it sufficed, in order to write a poem, that one is a poet and has written poems; as if insistence ('my . . . sight,/my . . . sight, my . . . sight') might equate to song.

I want to argue in this essay that while Levertov's work may not altogether succeed as political poetry, since it cannot bridge the gap between immanence and politics, or, to put it another way, it cannot connect the aesthetic apprehension of phenomena to invisible ideology or power, it succeeds, at its best, as a poetry of ethical life—by which I mean that it successfully communicates an ethical attitude or moral bearing; it does this most effectively, however, when the dramatic emphasis falls not on the poet as witness, but rather on that particularised other who, in the body of the poem, is witnessed or addressed—who even more than the poet or her voice may be said to be the occasion of the poem. Modern evil moves in such complicated social and political ways, Altieri argued, that Levertov was unable, when confronted by it, to achieve an aesthetically convincing moral realignment by means of visionary immanence¹⁹—but Altieri didn't distinguish, in his discussion, between the immanence of being and the immanence of persons. In this essay I will concentrate on the immanence of persons. I draw on Emmanuel Levinas's thought

¹⁸ Levertov, 'The Day the Audience Walked Out on Me, and Why', *CP*, pp. 420-1.

¹⁹ 'The aesthetics of presence is essentially monistic, conceiving evil as basically only a privation, a failure to perceive correctly or to align one's consciousness with the latent harmonious orders of a given scene.' Altieri, pp. 235-6.

that while my politics comprises the ideological positions that I take (or else, from the point of view of what is often called the hermeneutics of ‘suspicion’, the positions that take or construct me),²⁰ my ethics is how I comport myself to others at all times and prior to all ideological positions. Ethics not politics is how I come into the world.

I look at two poems by Levertov from her book *The Jacob’s Ladder* (1961). Levertov regarded the first of these poems, ‘During the Eichmann Trial’, an ambitious poem in three parts, as her first truly political poem (Hollenberg, p. 197). I am going to examine the first section of the poem, which is also, I think, the best and most interesting part of it, and we shall see there how Levertov already interrogates the limitations of the visual imagination—the problems of trying to understand the world by looking at it or looking at others looking. I then turn to her remarkable poem ‘A Solitude’, the last poem in the book, where she confronts her visual bias in even more impressive terms. In both poems, I argue, Levertov’s essentially ethical orientation is brought into relief.

*

The trial of Adolf Eichmann was a landmark event for several reasons. Eichmann had been captured in Argentina, in 1960, by agents of Mossad, the Israeli secret intelligence service, and smuggled back to Israel. His trial took place in Jerusalem the following year (April–December 1961).²¹ Unlike the Nuremburg Trials, therefore, it was conducted by the representatives of the people on whom the Holocaust was perpetrated. Consequently it aroused enormous international interest, one expression of which was Hannah Arendt’s polarising account of the

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven 1970), pp. 32–6.

²¹ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (New York 2011).

trial for *The New Yorker* magazine. One of the striking ironies about Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), is that it was written by a political philosopher who consistently distinguished between the political and the moral,²² and who denied that her *Report* contained a philosophical 'thesis',²³ yet it has been called the 'twentieth century's most important philosophical contribution to the problem of evil'.²⁴ Since it was not published until 1963, however, one year after Eichmann was hanged, it can't be said to have influenced Levertov's poem, which first appeared in 1961. But there is a significant parallel here with the argument I am making about Levertov—about how ethics becomes visible among the debris of politics.

I will concentrate on the first and longest section of 'During the Eichmann Trial': 'When We Look Up',²⁵ which has an epigraph from Robert Duncan: 'When we look up/each from his being'.²⁶ The poem begins therefore by foregrounding the act of looking.

He had not looked,
pitiful man whom none

²² See for example Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, especially ch. 5, 'Morals and Politics in a Post-Totalitarian Age' (Cambridge 1992), pp. 155-200.

²³ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1: *Thinking*, vol. 2: *Willing* (San Diego, 1978), vol. 1, p. 3.

²⁴ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton 2002), p. 271.

²⁵ Denise Levertov, 'During the Eichmann Trial', *P*, pp. 63-9 (pp. 63-5).

²⁶ Robert Duncan, 'Two Dicta of William Blake: Variations', I, *Poetry* 99.3 (December 1961), p. 172.

pity, whom all

must pity if they look

into their own face (given *l.5*

only by glass, steel, water

barely known) all

who look up

to see—how many

faces? How many *l.10*

seen in a lifetime? (Not those

that flash by, but those

into which the gaze wanders

and is lost

and returns to tell *l.15*

Here is a mystery,

a person, an

other, an I?

Count them.

Who are five million?)

l.20

Given what has been said about the importance of sight for Levertov, it is immediately significant that Eichmann ‘had not looked’—or not in the sense in which people ordinarily look around them, look beyond themselves, see what stares them in the face. With the pause at the end of the line reinforced by the comma, this first line has the weight of an epitaph, a monument of understatement, to sit alongside Arendt’s appalled summation: ‘*He merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realised what he was doing*’—never realised because he had no thought for others, could never put himself in the place of others, had no empathetic imagination.²⁷

In the first four lines, Levertov tightly weaves together inflexions of ‘look’ and ‘pity’, so that we’re invited to consider that to look is to pity; but she then complicates matters by allowing the glass ‘bulletproof witness-stand’ that encloses Eichmann, and which is concisely imitated in the poem by the parenthesis (ll. 5-7), to symbolise the problem of mediation—the idea, if you will, that ‘we see through a glass darkly’. Eichmann in other words is not alone in his blindness: how much of what we ‘all’ look at do we really see? If we could only see Eichmann, wouldn’t we have to pity him, to pity him for not pitying—and not looking?

It would be too simplistic to say that Levertov equates our failure to see with Eichmann’s. The poem’s studied lineation, the way it keeps its images apart even as it brings them together, and its provocative and evasive use of repetition, dangling identity before us yet simultaneously dissipating it, as repetition will, seem to refuse that simplification at the same time as the poem appears to suggest it. The next two sections of ‘During the Eichmann Trial’, ‘The Peachtree’ and ‘Crystal Night’, depict

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; New York 1994), p. 287.

the kind of notorious actions that have made it impossible for us to see Eichmann plain: the murder of a boy for picking fruit from Eichmann's garden, and the terror and mayhem of *Kristallnacht*, actions that are inseparable in effect from the bulletproof screen behind which Eichmann stands, actions that remind us why the screen is there. But in this opening section the visual metaphor invites us to look at, or think about, the relationship between different kinds of moral blindness, *without necessarily equating them*; and it also makes Eichmann a test-case of our willingness to look at others as well as at ourselves and to see ourselves in others: **'Here is a mystery, // a person, an / other, an I'**

The suspense produced throughout the poem by enjambement enables the phrase 'how many' in lines 9-10 to refer back for a moment to the 'all/who look up'—*how many of all those who look to see, see?*—before it becomes clear that it refers, in fact, to the question of how many are 'seen'; 'how many' thus shifts in the blink of an eye from being the subject of the verbs *to look* and *see* (with their evocative doubling—as if the words need glasses) to being their object, which is revealed, with fitting irony, by the unseen 'faces' at line 10 (resonating with 'their own face' from line 5). This lightning play of ideas takes another dazzling turn with the transition from 'an I' to 'Count them'—count the 'I's—'Who are five million?' (with three 'i's in the last two words).

We also come up against the quiet oddness of the question, not *what* is five million, what does that mean as a figure? but '*Who* are five million?'—a question that tries as it were to give everyone a face. Nowadays we tend to associate the figure of six million with the number of Jews murdered in the Holocaust, but that hasn't always been the case.²⁸ 'The Germans killed five million Jews,' Raul Hilberg wrote

²⁸ See for instance 'Holocaust Facts: Where Does the Figure of Six Million Victims Come From?', *Haaretz* (11 August, 2013).

emphatically in 1961, the year of the trial, in his monumental and ground-breaking study, *The Destruction of the European Jews*.²⁹ We go from the problem of human mass, which is a generalized feature of modern life (as in *The Waste Land*'s 'So many, I had not thought death had undone *so many*,' a line that seems to me to be echoed by Levertov),³⁰ to the specificity of Nazi mass murder. If we're not convinced about the number of the dead, the poem challenges us to 'Count them.' Whereupon it switches directly to Eichmann's own testimony, in the first person:

'I was used from the nursery

to obedience

all my life . . .

Corpselike

obedience.'

The 'I' stands out again. The reference to the nursery prepares the way for the story of the boy victim in part two of the poem and his grim encounter with 'mister death' (*P*, pp. 65-6). Levertov's positioning of the quotation, however, gives it a subtle and revealing ambiguity: 'I was used . . . to obedience' could mean, and in this context surely ought to mean, *I was used to being obeyed—used, in effect, to rendering others* 'corpselike'—and not merely *like*. But what it really refers to is something that was to outrage Hannah Arendt in her 'report' on the trial: Eichmann's dying protestation

<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/.premium-1.540880>. Accessed 9 August, 2016.

²⁹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961; New Haven 2003), vol. 3, p. 1059. Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was heavily indebted to Hilberg's work.

³⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), l. 63 (my emphasis).

that in murdering hundreds of thousands of Jews he had simply been *obeying* ‘duty’, ‘orders’ and the ‘law’.³¹ Levertov contrasts Eichmann’s unreal corpse with the real corpses of five million Jews.

As I have said, it may be that by figuring Eichmann’s aberration as a failure to see, much as Arendt cast it as an ‘inability to *think*’ (Arendt, p. 49), and then tentatively connecting that to everybody else’s failure to see, including the failure to see Eichmann (where to see is to ‘pity’, to ‘see into the life of things’, to compassionate with their life and death), exposes the limitations of the metaphor: it is too symmetrical. It implies a simplistic moral equivalence, as if my everyday blindness were essentially the same as Eichmann’s, when the salient point is surely that Eichmann, *out of what we might want to call blindness*, facilitated the murder of five million Jews, while our everyday blindness murders no one. The failure to see cannot be a sufficient cause by itself, or we’d all be murderers. The responsibility lies with Eichmann, not with the failure to see.

This reservation notwithstanding, I want to emphasise the significance of the pressure that Levertov is putting on the idea of looking, and one thing that I haven’t discussed so far is this image of looking as *looking up*—an idea which is itself placed *up*, at the very top of the poem. Levertov takes it, first of all, from Duncan, but it also becomes, as she deploys it, an allusion to the arrangement of the courtroom and the raised-up position of the ‘bulletproof/witness-stand of glass’. In developing the idea of looking at someone as looking up—looking up, moreover, at a mass-murderer—

³¹ Arendt was also struck by the same image that struck Levertov: Eichmann, she wrote, ‘became completely muddled, and ended by stressing alternately the virtues and the vices of *blind obedience*, or the “obedience of corpses,” *Kadavergehorsam*, as he himself called it’ (Arendt, p.135; my emphasis).

with its connotations of the abasement and self-transcendence of the viewer, Levertov is exploring an idea that is also fundamental to Levinas's ethics of attention. Levinas holds that when we respond to the other, which is to say, to the appeal of the other (for the other appeals to us by just being there)—'a solicitation that concerns me by its destitution and its Height'³²—the angle of our gaze is, automatically, morally elevated; that is to say, we 'look up/each from his being': no matter how wretched the other might be, he or she confronts us as from a height. The other humbles us into our humanity—brings us, figuratively, yet also through a kind of moral-spiritual geometry, to our knees. According to Levinas, here is the beginning of ethical life. We look up at the face of the other and our gaze is carried above and beyond it—to that face that is *not* the visible anatomical face.

The impossibility of seeing Eichmann plain, behind his glass cage, is connected in the poem to the idea, expounded most powerfully perhaps by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that *guilt starts with me—with one's own self first*: 'each of us is guilty in everything and before everyone, and I most of all';³³ which is also a *leitmotif* in the work of Levinas.³⁴ In 'When We Look Up', the idea is stated most baldly in the closing lines:

Pity this man who saw it
whose obedience continued—

³² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh 1969), p. 200.

³³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York 1992), p. 289.

³⁴ See Richard Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge 2001).

he, you, I, which shall I say?

He stands

isolate in a bulletproof

witness-stand of glass,

a cage, where we may view

ourselves, an apparition

telling us something he

does not know: we are members

one of another.

These stark verses may lack the sophistication of the opening twenty lines, with their brilliant interplay of lineation, metaphor and repetition, but there are still some touches worth noting: the repetition of 'I' ('he, you, I, which shall I say?') seems to underline once and for all that throughout this poem, the 'I' has been haunted by the *Ei* sound of Eichmann. It is captured one final time in 'isolate'. The oblique internal rhyme of 'he' and 'we' in the last three lines makes way for the still quieter echo of 'members' in 'another', where the dying fall of that unstressed final syllable is set off, contradictorily, by the solemnity, the weight, that comes from its being the concluding phrase.

‘I think too that we are members of each other. But what a poem it would be in which one saw and tasted that!’ (George Oppen to Denise Levertov, 13 April, 1963)³⁵

In the final poem of *The Jacob’s Ladder*, ‘A Solitude’, Levertov again took up the question of what constitutes looking, or not looking, the encounter with another and the nature of moral blindness. Despite its conspicuous position in the book, ‘A Solitude’ has received scarcely any critical attention, yet it seems to me to be one of Levertov’s greatest poems:³⁶

A blind man. I can stare at him
ashamed, shameless. Or does he know it?
No, he is in a great solitude.

O, strange joy,
to gaze my fill at a stranger’s face. l.5
No, my thirst is greater than before.³⁷

The poem begins with something like the question with which the Eichmann poem began: what does it mean to look up, ‘each from his being’, at someone who for one

³⁵ *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham N. C. 1990), p. 81.

³⁶ One exception was James Wright who reviewed *The Jacob’s Ladder* in *The Minnesota Review* and drew comparison with Rilke. ‘A Solitude’, he wrote, ‘is a special joy to those who have always felt the deep gravity which underlies Miss Levertov’s work . . . “A Solitude” will outlive misreaders, and categorizers, and her, and me.’ James Wright, ‘From “Gravity and Incantation”’ (1962), *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, pp. 18-9.

³⁷ Levertov, ‘A Solitude’, *P*, pp. 70-72 (ll. 1-6).

reason or another is unable to look. Of course, there is no suggestion here that the blind man is blind in the same way that Eichmann was—blind to evil. But the poem has begun by raising once again the question of what it means to think from the standpoint of the other—to think and to feel from and with. One important difference, however, is that now the speaker abandons the detached and disembodied point of view of the Eichmann poem and instead puts her own responses and assumptions on the line, monitoring her vacillation between (and her choice of words is an interesting one) shame and shamelessness. Unlike the Eichmann poem, therefore, where there is a troublingly neat attempt to relate the moral insensibility of Eichmann, his indifference to the other, to the insensibility of human beings generally, here the problem of moral insensibility, of the failure to submit one's attention to the other in his otherness, his difference, sits squarely between the poet-speaker and the man who is the object of her gaze. Who exactly is blind here, the poem asks, the speaker who is looking or the man who cannot see? As if to concede that every encounter is to some extent unique, there is no precipitate extrapolation to humanity at large.

The idea that the speaker's 'gaze' is driven by 'thirst' underlines the possibility that it is she who is blind—for thirst, like taste, strictly speaking, cannot see. The poem continues to play teasingly with the faculties of sense-perception, drawing attention to how we use them, too easily, as metaphors for one another, piling them up, it seems, like a whole theory of correspondences, but also recognising simultaneously, in the same breath, how they don't finally correspond to one another at all.³⁸ Being blind is not the same as being deaf or dumb, but the

³⁸ Levertov's exhortation to 'taste and see' (1964) would be another striking instance, the mixed metaphor gesturing to correspondences at the same time as it points up the lack of real symmetry.

thought that it might be (the way in which we too readily associate one disability with another) seems fleetingly to cross the speaker's mind:

In his world he is speaking
almost aloud. His lips move.
Anxiety plays about them. And now joy

of some sort trembles into a smile. *l.10*

A breeze I can't feel
crosses that face as if it crossed water.

The train moves uptown, pulls in and
pulls out of the local stops. Within its loud
jarring movement a quiet, *l.15*

the quiet of people not speaking,
some of them eyeing the blind man
only a moment though, not thirsty like me,

and within that quiet his
different quiet, not quiet at all, a tumult *l.20*
of images, but what are his images,

he is blind? He doesn't care
that he looks strange, showing
his thoughts on his face like designs of light

flickering on water, for he doesn't know l.25

what **look** is.

I see he has never seen.

The word 'No' that began lines 3 and 6 set the tone. The writing now edges forwards through its concentrated qualifications and corrections, as the speaker strains to drink up each baffling sign of this other's other life. She is intent upon him and we feel that. Despite the loudness of the train, she hears, in her alerted state, the quiet of their fellow passengers not speaking, only occasionally staring: 'and within that quiet his/different quiet, not quiet at all, a tumult/of images, but what are his images'. The internal rhymes that bind the poem together, the i's and y's of *blind*, *quiet*, *eyeing*, *only*, *thirsty*, seem to intensify by their narrow range the atmosphere of hushed concentration.

The description of the man's face, likening it to a surface of water that is disturbed by a flickering breeze or, in a striking phrase, 'designs of light', may owe something to Rilke's early poem '*Die Erblindende*'.³⁹ This body of water also answers

³⁹ '*Auf ihren hellen Augen die sich freuten/war Licht von außen wie auf einem Teich*'

('upon her eyes, which were radiant with joy,/light played as on the surface of a pool'). '*Die Erblindende*' ('Going Blind'), *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York 1989), pp. 32-3. In the essay 'Rilke as Mentor', Levertov writes of how Rilke both confirmed and deepened her insights regarding 'solitude': 'solitude as necessary for the poet's inner development, for that selfhood which must *be* in order to experience all the multifold otherness of life.' *New & Selected Essays* (New York 1992), pp. 231-8 (p. 234). '*Die Erblindende*' does not feature in the bilingual edition, Rainer Maria Rilke, *Fifty Selected Poems*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley 1941), which was Levertov's first encounter with the poet ('Rilke as Mentor', p. 232).

to, and yet keeps a discreet distance from, the speaker's indecorous 'thirst'—which is greedy, embarrassing, or, as the poem says, 'shameless', and contrasted with the more polite curiosity of the other passengers, who are 'not thirsty like me'. The speaker's confidence in her judgement, her inference, as when she declares 'I see he has never seen', corresponds to something exorbitant in Levertov's visionary presumption—but the poem doesn't hide that and gains from exposing it. More observations, surmises and corrections follow:

And now he rises, he stands at the door ready,
knowing his station is next. Was he counting?
No, that was not his need.

When he gets out I get out.
"Can I help you towards the exit?"
"Oh, alright." An indifference.

But instantly, even as he speaks,
even as I hear indifference, his hand
goes out, waiting for me to take it,

and now we hold hands like children.
His hand is warm and not sweaty,
the grip firm, it feels good.

The details are vivid—rich yet unfinished, as if the speaker were trying to draw someone, in a few pencil strokes, executed at full tilt. If he wasn't counting, how did he know that it was his stop? We're not told. His knowledge remains his. Was it only the speaker's thirst, her curiosity, that caused her to get out of the train when

he got out? What is the relationship between her 'thirst' and his perceived 'need'? The contradiction between the blind man's apparent 'indifference' to her offer of 'help' and the contrary action of 'his hand', which (like the speaker and the man himself leaving the carriage) 'goes out', is a brilliantly vivid detail. Had she expected his hand to feel 'sweaty' or not 'good'—and if so why? Because he is blind?

And when we have passed through the turnstile,
he going first, his hand at once
waits for mine again.

'Here are the steps. And here we turn
to the right. More stairs now.' We go
up into sunlight. He feels that,

the soft air. 'A nice day,
isn't it?' says the blind man. Solitude
walks with me, walks

beside me, he is not with me, he continues
his thoughts alone. But his hand and mine
know one another,

it's as if my hand were gone forth
on its own journey. I see him
across the street, the blind man,

and now he says he can find his way. He knows

where he is going, it is nowhere, it is filled

with presences. He says, **I am.**

Again the blind man seems to take the speaker by surprise, this time with his reference to the 'nice day'. The speaker sees that it is a nice day, and she has also seen the man respond, involuntarily, to the warm soft air. But it's as if she doesn't expect him to *say* it—as if saying or knowing it's a nice day (as if she knows better than he knows what he knows) were the preserve of those who see. There are more qualifications: 'Solitude/walks with me, walks/beside me, he is not with me, he continues'. The poet's hand proves more reliable than her eye. And there might be some reference here to the writer's hand—the art of writing as being, like the art of drawing, something more or wiser than the art of just seeing.

After another final flurry of contradictions, as the speaker gets ahead of herself again ('He knows/where he is going, it is nowhere, it is filled'), the short concluding sentence of the poem leaves us with a puzzle: 'He says, **I am**'. For the first time in the poem, yet twice in this final stanza, what someone 'says' is not presented in quotation marks, as plain direct speech. And, in the final instance, there is also this slightly portentous emboldening of the text, which, since it doesn't serve here to help us identify the tone in which the words might be uttered, seems instead, as often in such cases, to undermine itself, as if the poet doesn't trust the words to speak up by themselves. One might well read the finale as an error of judgement on Levertov's part—an intrusion of the egotistical sublime at the death, usurping the place of the blind man, whose portrait had been, until this point, rendered with a combination of passion, compassion and finesse reminiscent of a Rembrandt sketch. Is this another unfortunate example, in one of her finest poems, of the kind of empty or unearned assertion Altieri complained about (Altieri, p. 234)? It may indeed be.

But I want to consider another way of reading it, one that is made possible, that the reader has been prepared for, by the poem's contradictions and bifurcations.

The phrase 'he says he can find his way' doesn't pose too many problems. The dropping of the speech marks here could almost evoke the man going out of earshot, muttering to himself as much as to the speaker, as he recovers his independence, finds 'his way' back to himself (see the earlier lines: 'In his world he is speaking/almost aloud', ll. 7-8). But it is very difficult indeed to imagine this man, who had been no less banal than anybody else about the weather, saying, out of the blue, something so pompously metaphysical as those two final words, as if he'd been transmogrified suddenly into a living breathing instance of Coleridge's 'infinite I AM'.⁴⁰ When we look closely, however, we see that the poem doesn't actually say that he literally says them. In fact, the speaker tells us that by this point in the poem he has crossed to the other side of the street from where the speaker stands (she 'see[s] him/across the street'). Even if he did speak, the chances are that she wouldn't know. Since he must be walking away from her, she could only really be looking at his profile or his back—blind to most of his face and especially his mouth. So what are we to make of the last four words? I take the poem to be saying that it is the man's existence—or rather his existence and the speaker's encounter with it, both—that is doing the saying here. His life, body, motion, 'solitude', his otherness from her and from what she could not help herself assuming that he was—all this is what 'says'. He insists, so to speak, upon himself. But it's by no means clear that this utterance takes the form of words that are spoken from his mouth. The utterance is rather everything about him that declares him to be someone other than the speaker.

There is, to be sure, the distinct possibility that the speaker takes him to have spoken those two last words: 'He says, **I am.**' And again the poem itself, with its bold

⁴⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ch. 13.

letters, speaks too loudly, as if someone, perhaps the blind man, or the reader, were deaf. Meanwhile the comma cuts across the sentence like the street—two words either side of it. The blind man’s saying, and, as distinct from that, the speaker’s saying what he says *part company*—just as the speaker and the blind man do. The ambiguity intensifies—to include even the possibility that it is the speaker who is (‘I am’), the blind man who ‘says’. And the blind man’s saying, precisely because we do not know what else it says—whether it says anything more than what the encounter had, by this point, already told us—acquires a kind of infeasible, incorrigible opacity. The luminous opacity of mere saying—of a speech without words, *existence as utterance rather than as being*. The ontological ‘I am’ reverts, by contrast, to the speaker—who doesn’t say, who merely, monumentally, solitarily, is. The encounter is already over before the poem ends. And the poem in the end is stuck with itself. *It is*. Nevertheless, it is witness to an encounter—one that has crossed it like that image of the breeze described near the beginning of the poem, crossing the blind man’s face ‘as if it crossed water’. The speaker collapses back into that complacency of being from which she had temporarily ‘looked up’—speaking and encountering are here, as they are in Levinas, prior to, more powerful and more revelatory, and, as we see, more open-ended, than the closure/disclosure of being.⁴¹

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There is a certain appositeness in the fact that ‘During the Eichmann Trial’ concerns a man whose peculiar ingenuity expressed itself in arranging the deportation, by train, of ‘millions to their deaths’, while ‘A Solitude’ begins on a train and portrays a man whose physical disability (‘I see he has never seen’), if he had lived under the

⁴¹ For Levinas, as Cohen aptly puts it, ‘To be good—to spend an hour of one’s own precious time, once a week, reading to a blind person—is both to be and *to be beyond being*’ (Cohen, p. 14; my emphasis).

Nazis, might have cost him his life.⁴² But the relationship between ‘During the Eichmann Trial’ and ‘A Solitude’, the two final poems in *The Jacob’s Ladder*, is not one of superficial correspondences or clever inversions. The blind man does not occupy the position occupied by Eichmann vis-à-vis the speaker. He is not accused, he is not on trial—nor, as the poem makes plain, is he to be pitied (Eichmann by contrast is a ‘pitiful man whom/none pity’ yet all ‘must’). Instead, both poems deal with solitariness and isolation, separateness, otherness, seeing and not seeing, with the phenomenon of appearance as appearing-to: we appear to someone—or as Hannah Arendt would say, to multitudes of someones. Both poems are studies in relating or relationality and of the role of imagination in relating, and in failing or presuming to relate. But whereas ‘When We Look Up’ takes our common humanity as a given, a commonality that is set off by Eichmann, who failed to see it, and whose evil is somehow inextricable from that failure, ‘A Solitude’ discovers our common humanity in the ramifications of what we do not have in common—in the asymmetry of the encounter, in which the assertion of human being that constitutes its climax is manifestly not something felt in common but is only the barren iteration of an emphatic isolate ‘I am’. What underlines the poem’s passing greatness is precisely this final yet by no means comprehensive falling short.

There are a several ways in which we might draw upon the thought of Levinas in order to develop the significance of the conjuncture I describe. I’ve already mentioned the idea of moral height, the asymmetry of the encounter, the priority of ethics over ontology, and the enigma of the face, which latter is inseparable, for Levinas, from the primacy of saying. ‘The face speaks’, Levinas writes (p. 66). His celebrated notion of the face seems especially apt, for while Levertov almost certainly knew nothing of Levinas’s thought at the time of writing,

⁴² David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (London 2004), pp. 11.

the poem seems peculiarly alive to the idea that the face is not the physiological face; or, rather, it presents a remarkably revealing confirmation of, or variation on, that idea, heightened by the concentrated seeing that the speaker bestows on the man she's staring at. The face is not the eyes; nor is it even centred in the eyes—much as we might like to think it is; much as the painter, in especial, thinks it is. In Levertov's poem, the light is not concentrated in the blind man's eye but passes across the whole of his face; his face, we might say—in Levinas's sense of the term—lights up his face and disappears. Nor can we presume to judge what face the speaker presents to the blind man—in what light she appears to him; her face as he finds it.

Levertov's biographer Donna Hollenberg reports that Levertov would come to admire *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas's most celebrated work, which was, by coincidence, also published in 1961, the year of *The Jacob's Ladder* and the Eichmann trial (Hollenberg, p. 47). But if Levinas's book appeared too late to influence *The Jacob's Ladder*, it is worth noting that both he and Levertov were by this time already influenced by the work of Martin Buber, from which Levertov's book took its epigraph. We might also note, to complete the circle, that Arendt declared that Buber 'was the only philosopher to go on public record on the subject of Eichmann's execution' (Arendt, p. 252).

I want to end by developing another aspect of Levinas's thought that seems peculiarly relevant to 'A Solitude' and also helps to underline the profound connection between it and the Eichmann poem. For where, one might reasonably ask, is the question of evil in 'A Solitude', which was so fundamental to the trial of Adolf Eichmann? I turn back by way of answer to the feeling of shame, with which the poem begins; the speaker stares 'ashamed, shameless'—the words contiguous, neither getting the better of the other, shame in fact to the fore in both, whether acknowledged or brazened out; and along with shame the associated question of help

(‘Can I help you. . . ?’). For Levinas, my shame in the face of the other is testimony to the appalling fact that the life of the other is in my hands—the life of the other hangs from my life not by a monkey-rope, as Herman Melville thought, but by a thread.⁴³ I *feel* that I could murder or injure the other from one moment to the next—and that’s not a possibility that ever really goes away, as long as the other is there before me, face to face or in my mind’s eye. This power that I feel before the other—which comes from the other’s unseen dependence on me, on my not putting an end to him, or to her, which embarrasses my power, shows it up for the arbitrary thing it is—is one source of my shame, whose other source is, at the same time, my desire for the other, my ‘thirst’. It is out of the depths of this ‘shame’ that the offer of help reaches out its ‘hand’.

Levinas expresses this movement, which is also the very movement of Levertov’s poem, as follows:

The Other is not initially a *fact*, is not an *obstacle*, does not threaten me with death; he is desired in my shame . . . It is necessary to have the idea of infinity, the idea of the perfect, as Descartes would say, in order to know one’s own imperfection. The idea of the perfect is not an idea but a desire; it is the welcoming of the Other, the commencement of my moral consciousness, which calls in question my freedom. Thus this way of measuring oneself against infinity is not a theoretical consideration; it is accomplished as shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise . . .

Conscience welcomes the Other. It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living

⁴³ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*; or, *The Whale* (1851), ch. 72.

being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent. (Levinas, p. 84)

The speaker's desire, her 'thirst', is, in Levinas's words, her desire for the infinite (as the inescapable biblical resonance of Levertov's metaphor makes clear), which she 'welcomes' in the blind man facing her—a 'revelation of a resistance to' her 'powers that does not counter them as a greater force' (which he is plainly not), but rather 'calls in question' their 'naïve right'; pulling the carpet out from underneath her 'glorious spontaneity' as a poet and a 'living being'. Freedom feels itself to be 'arbitrary and violent'.

After Levinas, I know of no more eloquent description of shame than Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's, who, though writing in what seems to be a very different context, expressly connects it to 'pogroms' and 'survivors' guilt': 'One of the strangest features of shame', she writes, 'is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment by someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, blame or pain, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me—assuming that I'm a shame-prone person—with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable.'⁴⁴ Sedgwick's 'shame-prone person' is precisely, for Levinas, the ethical person, whose susceptibility connects her at the same time as it isolates her.⁴⁵

Shame might also offer us, finally, another way of thinking about the Eichmann poem. There is the shamelessness, most obviously, of Eichmann himself. 'He had not looked', Levertov begins. She doesn't immediately spell out at what,

⁴⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1 (1993), pp. 1-16.

⁴⁵ As Judith Butler puts it: 'Levinas would say that prior susceptibility is already the ethical.' Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York 2015), p. 200 (n. 6).

letting the significance of the phrase expand indefinitely, to take in something of the landscape that Arendt had also been addressing when she described Eichmann's complete lack of empathetic imagination (Arendt, pp. 47-9). He had not thought to look—into the other's face or from his point of view. He was not brought to his senses by the other—or in Levinas's terms, brought to his finitude by the infinity in the other. And just as he was a man who was oblivious to the transcendence of the other (who discovered in himself no desire for the infinite or idea of the perfect), so he was a man who had no hand in what he did—a man who was shameless. 'He did his *duty*, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law*' (Arendt, p. 135). As he gave himself up to the principal of obedience, he claimed to lose all feeling: 'as the months and the years went by, he lost the need to feel anything at all' (ibid). His obedience became cadaverous (*Kadavergehorsam*), as he said. His actions didn't touch him—or in Levertov's terms, he 'signs papers/then eats'.

Hollenberg writes that Levertov 'indicts both Eichmann and her audience in the free world' (Hollenberg, p. 194). Indicts, I think, is fair—the poet also indicts herself, as part of that free world. But the feeling of shame, in the sense in which Levinas understands it, the sense in which it is apparent in 'A Solitude', is not, I think, an explicit feature of the Eichmann poem—and that is presumably because Eichmann felt none. He was not humiliated by the power of life and death that he enjoyed over others; he was not brought to his knees by something infinite in one or other of his victims; he did not 'look up'. When we finally discover our murderousness, our freedom is a shameful thing. Shame exposes our susceptibility and divests us of our solipsism. Accordingly, the fact that Eichmann felt no shame acts as a kind of prohibition on where imagination might presume to tread; for, confronted with Eichmann's shamelessness, *our shame*—the poet's shame—is not,

and cannot be, the point. Levertov can only look on, in pity, while she interrogates the limitations of looking and of pity.

Acknowledgements

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